

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD "C"
APRIL 13/14, 2019

Last November on my pilgrimage to Israel as our motor coach traversed the street at the foot of Mt. Zion, the base of the ancient city of Jerusalem, our guide pointed out the small valley directly below known as "Gehenna." In the Hebrew Bible, Gehenna was where kings of pre-covenant Judah sacrificed children by fire. Because of its association with such abominable practices, Gehenna was a place cursed. In Jesus' time it was the city dump, and like all refuse centers, a perpetual fire burned consuming all that was deposited there. It acquired symbolism as the place where the wicked of the world were consigned by God at death. Tradition holds that it was the place where Judas went following his betrayal and the arrest of Jesus and, in despair, hanged himself. As I looked out of the window of our motor coach I spotted a lone tree in the valley and thought of the tragic story of Judas.

When it comes to the events of Holy Week, I suspect most of us probably don't give much, or any, thought to Judas and his fate. Judas, we assume and/or judge, got what he deserved for his heinous sin and was consigned to hell and its torments and its eternal separation from God, a traditional Christian appropriation of Gehenna. But is this the whole of Judas' story? Is it possible that the redemptive grace won for all of us, all people, through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross also provided a means of salvation even for Judas?

Pope Francis in an interview with a priest prison chaplain discussing the petition in the Lord's Prayer "forgive us our trespasses" references a picture that he keeps on the wall behind his desk in which Judas figures prominently. "Judas is a figure who is difficult to understand, though there have been many interpretations of his personality. In the end, however, when he sees what he has done, he goes to the 'righteous,' to the priests, and says, 'I have sinned, because I betrayed innocent blood.' They reply to him, 'What does that have to do with us? See to it yourself' (cf. Mt. 27:3-10). So he goes off with the guilt that suffocates him. ...The poor guy goes away, finds no way out, and hangs himself. However, there is one thing that makes me think that the story of Judas does not end there. ...In the Basilica of St. Mary Magdalene in Vezelay, in the province of Burgundy in France, there is a medieval column (pillar) also known

as a capital. People of the Middle ages taught and learned the faith through visual means such as architecture, stained glass windows, sculpture, and other images since most people could not read. On one side of the capital is Judas after he hanged himself, but on the other side is the Good Shepherd lifting him onto his shoulders and taking him with him. On the lips of the Good Shepherd is the hint of a smile that I would not call ironic, but somewhat shrewdly knowing.” The Holy Father’s point is clear—even Judas in his sin, guilt, shame, despair, and tortured death—did not fall out of the orbit of God’s forgiveness and mercy! God’s love provided a way of redemption even for Judas! If there was no possibility of forgiveness, mercy and redemption for Judas, what hope is there for any of us? All sin, small or great, is abhorrent to God. Who of us is so bold to claim we are without sin, without need of God’s forgiveness, without need of divine mercy? to demand salvation? The catechetical column in the Basilica in the city of Vezelay proclaims the truth of the author of the Second Letter of Peter: “God is patient, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (II Pt. 3:9) even so great a sinner as Judas.

No one of us, regardless of our past or present sin, our guilt or shame at our little or huge betrayals of Jesus, should feel, much less believe, we are beyond the gaze of God’s love, mercy, forgiveness and redemption offered us through the cross of Jesus. This is the promise and hope of Holy Week.

Grace, mercy and peace to all of you. (I Tm. 1:2)